

Human remains, museum space and the 'poetics of exhibiting'

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Abstract

The paper explores the role of the design of museum space in the challenges set by the display of human remains. Against the background of 'embodied understanding', 'multisensory learning' and 'affective distance' and of contextual case studies, it analyses the innovative spatial approach of the Moesgaard Museum of the University of Aarhus, which, it argues, humanizes bog bodies and renders them an integrative part of an experiential, embodied and sensory narrative. This allows the mapping of spatial shifts and new forms of engagement with human remains, and also demonstrates the role of university museums as spaces for innovation and experimentation.

Introduction and research question

This paper aims to explore the issue of the respectful presentation of human physical remains in contextual exhibitions by looking at the role of museum space in the challenges set by their display, with particular reference to the contribution of experimentation in the university museum environment. The debate raised by the understanding that human remains “are not just another artefact” (stated by CASSMAN et al. 2007, in GIESEN 2013, 1) is extensively discussed in the literature, and increasingly explored through a range of museum practices. In terms of theoretical understanding, authors have sought to acquire an overall picture of approaches towards the care of human remains so as to better understand the challenges raised. For example, among the most recent publications, O’Donnabhain and Lozada (2014) examine the global diversity of attitudes to archaeological human remains and the variety of approaches to their study and curation in different countries. In contrast, Giesen (2013) looks at the UK and provides an overview at the national scale of current tendencies. In terms of practice, of particular interest are the perspectives on the care and display of human remains, and research into them, seen through the lens of a particular institution, the British Museum, by Fletcher, Antoine and Hill (2014). From the point of view of this paper, it is illuminating that, in this publication, emphasis is given to the display of bog bodies (JOY 2014) and mummies (TAYLOR 2014) – which are also the focus here – in the belief that, with their “materiality”, well preserved features and distinct individual traits, they set additional challenges.

It is also particularly interesting that in the literature special attention has been given to the display of human remains in university museums and the experimental and innovative approaches they often adopt. An exemplary case is the display of Lindow Man in the Manchester University Museum in 2008 (see JENKINS 2011; SITCH 2009; BROWN 2011), one of the case studies in this paper. Both theoretical perspectives and curatorial experiences have been the subject of international conferences such as the ones held in the Museum of London in 2004 (see LOHMAN & GOODNOW 2006) and in 2007 (see SWAIN 2007) which “illustrate just how diverse the uses of human remains and the views about them are” (SWAIN 2007, 197). However, as noted by Sanders (2009, 183), despite the rich accumulating literature, “the question of what happens when the displayed archaeological artefact is a human being has not yet been fully answered”.

With these debates and challenges as context, the aim of this paper is, as noted, to focus on the spatial dimension of their presentation and how this can contribute to their respectful integration into the overall display narrative. We are particularly interested in their spatial arrangement, the positioning of their display in the museum itinerary and its accessibility and visibility links with other spaces and displays, and, in general, in the contribution of spatial design to the aim of humanizing human remains, rather than objectifying them “as scientific objects or data” (ANTOINE 2014, 3). The question is set against the background of, on the one hand, the augmented awareness in museum theory and practice of the role of space in the construction of exhibition meaning, and, on the other, the increasing engagement of museums with embodied and sensory forms of knowledge.

Reflecting this, the first part of the paper reviews the general significance of the spatial dimension in the creation of museum experience, and the concept of ‘embodied understanding’. The second part shifts the focus of attention to museum practice to examine through background cases, and in particular university museums, how space has a key and variable role in presentations of human remains, which depends, it is suggested, on the degree to which they are conceptualised as once living human beings. The third part of the paper analyses, based on in-depth in situ observation, the main case study: the Moesgaard Museum, a combined archaeological and ethnographic museum of the University of Aarhus, Denmark. The Moesgaard Museum constitutes, it will be argued, an innovative example in terms of the display of some of the best preserved bog bodies in the world, a key parameter in which is its spatial approach. The analysis shows how the human remains, by being treated as past people, become an integrative part of an experiential, embodied and emotional narrative. The display is organized as a series of experiences which, while spatially separate, and often intimate, are intricately interwoven. A narrative is constructed as each builds on the previous one conceptually, while synergies between spaces intensify contextual associations. This approach, as is shown, affects visitors’ experience and in particular their sense of co-presence with other visitors.

Looking at the Moesgaard Museum in conjunction with the background case studies brings to the surface spatial shifts in the display of human remains which suggest there may be deeper and more enriching ways in which we, as visitors, can engage with archaeological remains of human beings in museums. No less importantly, it demonstrates the role of university museums as incubators of new ideas and experimental approaches.

Theoretical context: physical dimension, embodied understanding and affective engagement

In the later part of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first, the importance of space in creating the museum experience has become a focus of interest in the museum studies literature. Falk and Dierking (1992) proposed to conceptualize the museum experience as the interaction between three contexts which are “inextricably bound together”, in what they call the ‘Interactive Experience Model’: the ‘personal’ (visitors’ experience and knowledge, interests and motivations), the ‘social’ (accompanying group, other visitors, staff) and the ‘physical’ (including architecture and the feel of the building as well as the objects on display). “At the level of the exhibit, at the level of the exhibition and finally at the level of the building”, they say, “the visitor’s experience is influenced by the creation of space” (2000, 123). This powerfully affects how visitors behave, what they observe and what they remember (1992, 3), as there are strong links between places, emotions and memories (2000, 64).

The idea of an interconnection between cognition and the physical context, and cognition and affect (FALK & DIERKING, 1997, 216) is shared by Roberts (1992). Pointing to different modes through which visitors can receive information, she argues that museums in the past have prioritised “information-based” learning over “experience-based”, and have neglected affect. “A museum visit is first and foremost a physical encounter” (1992, 162), she argues, and “messages reside throughout the physical fabric” of museums (including the “physical facts of layout”, colour and lighting) and not only in verbal forms and literal messages (1992, 167).

Recent developments in cognitive science and neuroscience argue for an ‘embodied’ or ‘situated’ approach to human cognition (BEDFORD 2014, 72) and emphasize that all experience of the world is multisensory (LEVENT & PASCUAL-LEONE 2014). The current view of ‘understanding’ is that it is not just an intellectual operation but rather a series of full-bodied engagements with our surroundings; it is “less a form of knowing or thinking than it is a matter of experiencing and acting” (JOHNSON 2015, 875). In his ‘Embodied theory of meaning’, Mark Johnson argues, referring to Dewey’s concept of the ‘body-mind’, that “mind and body are not two things” and that meaning is grounded in “bodily engagement with the physical dimensions of place and space” (2002, 76; 78) as well as movements, emotions, and feelings (2007, ix). He highlights that “what we actually experience are whole, unified situations, within which we experience individual objects” (2015, 875, 3). These developments have brought more emphasis, in the museum field, to the effects of space on the way in which we perceive displays, and to its interactions with visual, auditory and other aspects of visitor experience. Museums are now increasingly seeking to provide multimodal experiences and information from different senses meaningfully integrated. Multisensory learning is related, among other things, to increased engagement and a beneficial impact on subsequent remembering (LEVENT & PASCUAL-LEONE 2014).

More specifically, in the context of assigning a crucial role to embodied understanding in museum displays, Witcomb (2014; 2015) proposes the concept of a ‘pedagogy of feeling’ to describe exhibition strategies that work sensorially, inviting visitors to “look, listen and feel”. Immersive and sensorial experiences in such displays engage the viewer in a direct and physical way and provoke emotional, even empathetic responses, privileging experience over reason. A key dimension of this is the reconstruction of the narrative by the visitor as the accumulative effect of experiences, rather than as a sequence.

This way of theorising new forms of display practices finds a parallel in the emergence in the late twentieth century of affective historiography and in particular of the concept of ‘affective distance’ proposed by Mark Salber Phillips (2006; 2013). Challenging the idea that historical distance refers to the “growing clarity that comes with the passage of time” (2013, 1) and to detachment, Salber Phillips sees it as a construction that varies in type and degree (2013, 7). It is made up of “all positions from near to far” and “encompasses the variety of ways in which we are placed in relation to the past”. This includes affective engagement, which Salber Phillips relates to “the intimate and immersive displays and sentimental techniques” (2013, 231) of contemporary museums. These, in contrast to “old-fashioned display cases that place a barrier between visitor and artefact”, aim to provide “a visually immediate sense of the past” (WHITEHEAD et al. 2015, 53) and “make it as accessible as possible” (2013, 216) through new forms of spatialisation.

Background case studies: the variable role of space in the display of human remains

From the point of view of this paper, what is of particular interest is that over recent years the spatial dimension has become a key parameter in the display of human remains and an explicit issue in the guidelines and policies issued by governmental bodies (as in the UK and Scotland), national and international museum associations (for example, ICOM and Museums Association, UK) as well as individual museums (as the British Museum). In the case of the UK, in the key document, the 'Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums', issued in 2005 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), it is recommended that museums should ensure that visitors do not come across them unaware, but display them in a "specially partitioned or alcove part of the gallery". These recommendations, in the form of questions to consider, accompanied by examples, are also included in 'Guidelines for the Care of Human Remains in Scottish Museum Collections', by Museums Galleries Scotland (2011, 17-18). A similar recommendation, to "consider providing advance notice to audiences prior to display", is formulated in the 2016 'Additional Guidance' to the revised 'Code of Ethics' of Museums Association (2016, 9, paragraph 2.3).

These concerns are increasingly reflected in current museum practice. In traditional museum displays we tend to find the absence of spatial distinction in the presentation of human remains. This can be illustrated by the 'Egypt' galleries of the British Museum, and in particular the 'Early Egypt' gallery (Room 64). This gallery includes the display of the well-preserved naturally mummified remains of an adult male from the late Pre-dynastic Period (c. 3500 BC), at the site of Gebelein, Upper Egypt, known as Gebelein Man. The transparent display case (which is accompanied by a nearby virtual autopsy table allowing visitors to explore interactively the CT scan data) is located along the main circulation axis that traverses the enfilade of spaces and extends along the whole north side of the museum. The Gebelein Man is thus exposed to the unintentional views of visitors passing through this main route of the museum. In this case, it could be argued, the human remains are seen as exhibits comparable to others, not requiring any special spatial treatment.

In the case of a later (1997) display in the British Museum, that of the Lindow Man, a different approach is adopted. The well-preserved body (dating between 2 BC – AD 119) was found in a peat bog at Lindow Moss, near Manchester, in 1984, and "has been on permanent display at the British Museum for over twenty years", in different locations (see JOY 2014, 10–19). In its current display in the Iron Age gallery (Room 50), which, interestingly was "put in place" before the DCMS guidelines (JOY, 2014, 17), a visually protected area was created in one corner of the gallery. The square, hip-level display case (accessible from two sides) is off the axis, and inward looking, requiring a short detour by the visitor. The display is accompanied by explanatory material (information panels which include a photograph of the find spot).

In this respect, it is of interest to juxtapose this permanent display of the Lindow Man in the British Museum to its presentation for the temporary exhibition ('Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery'), in 2008, at the Manchester University Museum. This was the third time Lindow Man was loaned for a temporary period (earlier exhibitions in 1989 and 1991) and the idea was to create "a polyvocal exhibition" which explored the different meanings of Lindow Man for different people, instead of the museum's single authoritative voice (see BURCH 2008; SITCH 2009; BROWN 2011). For the presentation of the Lindow Man, spatial separation and availability of route choice to omit the space, were proposed in the context of public consultation. But "it transpired that placing Lindow Man towards the end of the exhibition and creating a separate corridor for visitors not wanting to see the body could not be accommodated within the narrow confines of the Museum's Temporary Exhibition Gallery" (SITCH 2010, 400).

The idea that a respectful display means spatial separation, as formulated in the DCMS guidelines, is reflected in the exhibition 'Kingship and Sacrifice', opened in 2006, in the National Museum of Ireland. The exhibition includes four bog bodies (c. 400 BC and 200 BC) and is centred on a new theory that connects their location to important ancient boundaries, and assigns them a protective function (KELLY 2006). The bodies are "not exposed within the general exhibition space, of which they form part conceptually. Instead, each occupies a high-walled cylindrical cell, dimly lit and large enough for only a handful of people to enter at one time" (O' SULLIVAN 2007, 20; see also GILES 2009). In this case, the spatially separated space for the human remains is designed to create the sense of "very private spaces – almost sepulchral – and, on entering these cells, visitors feel compelled to speak in quiet voices or to not speak at all" (O' SULLIVAN 2007, 20). It could be argued that the museum uses the sense of place created by spatial separation to intensify the feeling that these human remains were once living human beings.

Taken together, these three cases are indicative examples of the variety of forms of displays that exist in parallel in current museum displays (in this case, in the UK), and begins to show the role of space in the display of human remains as past people. Against this background, we will turn to the main case study, the Moesgaard Museum.

Main case study: the innovative Moesgaard Museum of the University of Aarhus

Since 2014, the Moesgaard Museum (whose history dates back to the years following WWII) is housed in a new building designed by Henning Larsen Architects. The building is inspired by the concept of an archaeological excavation: it is positioned on the side of a hill, partly submerged in the site, and blended with the natural landscape. It is structured on two levels: the upper level dedicated to the ethnographic collections, presented under the theme of the 'Lives of the Dead'; and the lower level bringing together the archaeological collections, chronologically arranged in adjacent spatial complexes (the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Vikings and the Middle Ages).

The focus of the paper is the spatial complex dedicated to the Bronze Age (1700–500 BC) and the Iron Age (500 BC–AD 800). Each section includes a space devoted to the display of human remains: in the Bronze Age section are the bodies of three members of a family, (c.1350–1300 BC), found in 1875 in the Borum Eshøj barrow; and in the Iron Age section, the Grauballe Man, a bog body of the 3rd century BC, which is the highlight of the museum. It was found in 1952 in Grauballe, in Central Jutland, and put immediately on public display in the then Prehistoric Museum at Aarhus by Professor Peter Glob.

The complex of the Bronze and Iron Age as a whole is organized on three levels and is essentially an open space divided into sub-spaces, often characterised by curved geometries. The spaces are darkened, and objects, directly spotlighted, unify the environment and create "an illuminated space of intimacy for each work" (PALLASMAA 2014, 243).

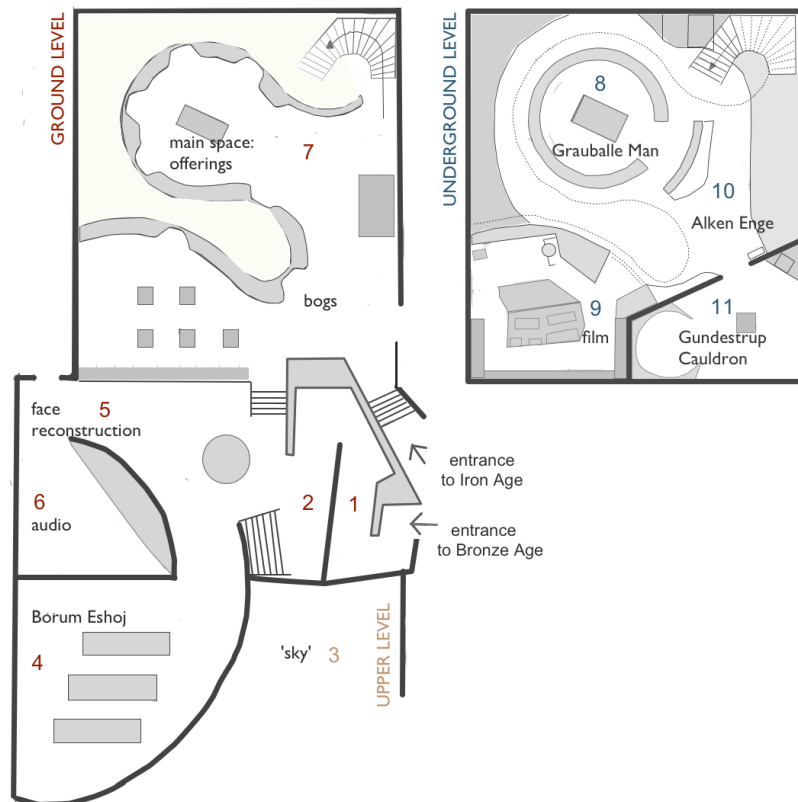


Fig. 1
Plan of the Moesgaard Museum
(based on the museum map), with
the spaces numbered

The display narrative and its spatialization

Looking at the display narrative (fig. 1), the first two spaces of the Bronze Age section (spaces 1-2 in fig.1) set the broader context by reference to key features of the period, such as travel and trade in metal, and the construction of barrows of grass turf. A staircase leads to the upper level small space (named here the 'sky' space) (space 3), which is related to astronomy and the Bronze Age people's ability to predict the movement of celestial bodies (fig. 2a). Under the 'sky' space, is an enclosed dead-end space, which has the form of a barrow (space 4). Signs, in the form of footsteps on the floor, lead the visitor to its low opening. This space shows the bodies of the small family – an old man, a young man and a woman – in their oak coffins and wearing their clothes (fig. 2b). It is quite dark and only the three transparent display cases are dimly lit, while its walls create the sense of the "earthen chamber" of the grave (PRICE 2015, 481). The display of the bodies extends to two adjacent spaces: one (space 5) shows on screens the process of reconstruction of their faces based on CT scan of their skulls; and the other (space 6), which is divided from their main display space by a semi-transparent wall, presents their discovery as audio narrative, together with their life-size reconstructions, with the woman and the young man interacting over the lying body of the old man.

The main space of the Iron Age section (space 7), that follows on a slightly higher level, places the emphasis on the significance of bogs as a prominent part of the landscape and a gateway to another world. It is differentiated, and so enhanced in relation to the rest of the complex, by its spatial features and visual scale: it is double-height, defined by a curved, low fence-like form, and, at the same time, enveloped at a distance by the walls of the building (fig. 2c). This distance from the walls creates a surrounding void that extends to the underground level, unifying vertically the two levels, while suggesting the form of a bog. This allusion is further enhanced by the soft floor of the main space, in conjunction with the green colour of the display cases, which create the sense of walking on a bog. Entering the space, the first thing that visitors see is a glass opening in the middle. This allows visitors a view to the enclosed underground space below, which is dedicated to the Grauballe Man. The displays around the glass opening illustrate the variety of offerings to the gods, as documented by archaeological findings such as a cut-off length of a woman's hair, neck rings (worn both by men and women), as well as skeletal remains of animals (e.g. dog and horse skulls). The Grauballe Man is also thought to be such an offering. Four animated short films are projected on the walls of the building, each narrating a personal story (three from the perspective of a woman – 'Karla', 'Tova' and 'Sigrid' –, and the fourth from that of a father – 'Thorsten' – and his son). These films suggest a picture of life in prehistoric Jutland and work as an imaginative and emotive background to the display of objects. Strikingly, as the films are activated individually by visitors, the way they are synchronized in the collective main space can never be predetermined and so exactly repeated, creating a unique experience of this display each time it is visited.

Descending a curved stairway, visitors find the space of the Grauballe Man (space 8 in fig.1 and fig. 2d). The bog body is presented in a glass case, in the centre of a circular, intimate and dark room, as the sole 'exhibit', surrounded by a continuous seating for visitors. The space is devoid of textual information. A neighbouring room (space 9) presents a 15-minute film about the discovery, preservation and display history of the Grauballe Man. On the whole, the lower level (space 10) continues the focus on the theme of offerings in lakes and bogs, including skeletal remains of people who had the same fate as the Grauballe Man, as well as bones of sacrificed warriors as an offering ritual in the lake at Alken Enge. The last space of the complex (space 11) focuses on the silver and richly decorated Gundestrup cauldron, which was also found in a bog, perhaps used in important rituals for gods and goddesses represented on its exterior.

Fig. 2

Moesgaard Museum, University of Aarhus. (a) The upper-level small space related to astronomy seen from the main space; (b) The Borum Eshoj space with the three bodies in coffins; (c) View of the main space, defined by the curved, low, fence-like form and enveloped by the walls of the building, on which the animated films are projected. In the foreground, the glass opening through which visitors can see the Grauballe Man; (d) The Grauballe Man space.

Photographs: Media Department, courtesy of © Moesgaard Museum



Contextualisation of human remains through spatial, visual and sensorial links of displays

The display narrative is then largely structured as a series of experiences, which are distinct yet tightly interwoven like the pieces of a puzzle. Here we propose that the puzzle can be decoded by examining how human remains are given spatial form in the display, in such a way as to construct an underlying narrative.

At the global scale of the complex, the links between the three levels (upper, ground and lower) acquire a symbolic dimension. The upper-level 'sky' space is visible from the main ground-floor space, which gives visitors a picture of life in Prehistoric Jutland. In parallel, from this main space, the Grauballe Man, displayed in the enclosed underground space, can also be seen through the glass opening in the middle. Thus, the spatial design of the three levels suggests metaphorical meanings of sky, life, and underground world.

Looking closely at the positioning of the two spaces with human remains in the museum itinerary, we find that both are relatively segregated and closed spaces in the layout (as advised in guidelines), but combined either with a clear route leading to it, as in the case of the Borum Eshoj where foot-steps on the floor show the way; or with high visual and spatial accessibility, as in the case of the Grauballe Man space, where visitors become aware of the body at two different stages of the narrative and view it from different distances.

For the Borum Eshoj family, the space takes the circular form of the real, original context, of the barrow. Once the visitor is inside, the space is dark, with only the three coffins partially lit. These are arranged to invite movement among them so the bodies can be seen, and no seating is provided. But this display is accompanied by the presentation, in the more accessible adjacent closed space, of the three people as living human beings through their life-size reconstruction. In the 'living' space, there is a continuous bench on one side, coupled with the audio equipment. Access from one space to the other requires exiting and finding another route. Taken as a whole, the complex creates a meaning, involving architectural form (that of the barrow), spatial relations (the closed spaces), visitor activity (moving and sitting), and human remains as dead and living beings. This meaning acknowledges death, but points to life.

In the Iron Age case, the bog body is also located in a circular and dark (though less so than the previous case) space, on a similar scale to that of the Bronze Age. But, unlike that case, the Grauballe Man space does not take the form of its original context. It creates, in contrast, a lived experience, in the form of an environment that expresses a spatial and social relation to a dead person. The centrally placed body, surrounded by the well-used seating at the perimeter, leaves little space for movement. The effect is that visitors sitting in the space create the form of a characteristic spatial (surrounding) and social (many people) relation to the recently dead, like participants in a relation of tribute or mourning. As in the Bronze Age case, a meaning is created linking architecture, space and visitor activity, and again that meaning reflects the fact of death but also that of the dead as once a social being.

Between the two spaces with human remains, there is one more well-defined circular space, the double-height main space of the complex. Unlike the human remains spaces, this space is integrated in the museum layout, and combines spatial closedness with visual openness, linking visually the pattern of everyday life (through the exhibits and the films) with the 'sky' as well as the underground world of the bog body (through the glass opening). At the same time, the main space is highly active in terms of visitor behaviour. Informal observations show that it is characterised by interaction between visitors and so by active social co-presence: people visiting together (in groups of 2, 3 or more) consistently interact, talking, watching films together, showing things to each other. So if the human remains spaces can be said to create a meaning which reflects death but points to life, the main space reflects the richness of life, but also points to death.

Against this background of visual, spatial, symbolic and social relations, further connections between levels and spaces are created through sensorial links. For example, exhibition elements, and in particular lights in a form bringing to mind wooden clubs, or birch trees (PRICE 2015, 482), traverse the double-height main space through to its lower level, so connecting ground and underground displays. Like light, sound – another key element of the display space 'atmosphere' – is also used to unify the environment and intensify visitors' sensory experience. Sound sources, such as ambient sounds of the physical world that enhance imagination, and, background music played in the spaces at low volumes, often combined with whispering voices from the narration of accompanying films, immerse visitors in "a sense of a coherent experiential entity" (PALLASMAA 2016, 130). All contribute to focusing visitors' "sense of reality into the imaginative world of the subject matter" (PALLASMAA 2014, 246).

The 'poetics of exhibiting'

More theoretically, and linking the different threads of this analysis together, it could be argued that, over and above the information-based content of the display (e.g. through brief labels and touch-screens), it is the sensory, immersive and embodied experiences that shape understanding. Meaning is created through the presence of objects, the affordances of space, the sensory qualities of architecture and the imaginative use of technology, or, in Lidchi's terms, through "the poetics of exhibiting, the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition" (LIDCHI 1997, 168). The rich network of connections is used to construct conceptual interlinking of the different experiences and contribute to the making of meaning. The visitor acquires through space the experience not of a sequential narrative but of a set of interrelated spatial and social propositions with a common theme: that the human remains were once living people. Strikingly, this is realised not only through visitors' physical movement through the different spaces and levels, but also through their stasis in a single space. This is most clearly expressed in the Grauballe Man space where people are observed to gather and sit silently in contemplative co-presence, and to experience collective affect as if in a memorial space.

Comparative and concluding remarks: mapping spatial shifts and engagement changes

Looking back at all our cases, two interlinked points seem to be emerging. First, it could be suggested that, as we increasingly see human remains as past people rather than museum objects, we observe a move from their presentation in easily accessible, or integrated, display spaces or locations (as in the Egypt galleries of the British Museum) to segregated and enclosed spaces (as in the National Museum of Ireland). Display cases lying on key lines of movement are replaced by those in convex spaces that intensify local experiences, and open visibility and exposure give way to visual insulation and intimacy. The second point follows from the first and relates to what our main case study, the Moesgaard Museum, seems to bring to respectful presentations of human remains: that is, their integrative role in the display narrative and in the embodied and affective nature of the museum’s experience, rather than their separation and their presentation through rational discourse. Close encounters with human remains become part of the experiences that make up the narrative. Visitors are invited to “look, listen and feel” and this leads them to make sense of the whole “by building on the accumulative effect of the sequence of displays they have just experienced”, and which complement each other, as proposed by Witcomb (2015, 338). In this sense, the Moesgaard Museum’s spatial approach and emphasis on bodily, richly sensory and affective experience could also be seen as a mode of mediation with the past. In particular, it relates to the approach Salber Phillips (2006) describes as presenting “the past as a field of experience” rather than only “as an object of study”, through proximity and affective engagement rather than distance and detachment.

These changes over time in spatial design are summarised in table 1. From an initially neutral use of space, we see first a shift to a relatively negative one, in the sense that it is required to prevent people coming across human remains unaware, and allows their deliberate omission. At the same time this spatial negativity can be associated with the positive effect of creating spaces which intensify visitors’ experiences of the human remains, including the sense that they are human. This is then followed by a shift to a spatial design that makes human remains an integral part of the museum’s embodied and affective narrative and constructs a powerful sense that they were once living beings. As the analysis showed, this is realised through specific kinds of space and spatial relations, sometimes with symbolic meaning, and through visitor activity in those spaces as lived experiences. The different arrangements afforded by the spatial design of the Moesgaard Museum create a richness of experiences and perceptions, which are critical to how the narrative is constructed and, most importantly, to how human remains are contextualised and individualised, and their humanness enhanced.

Table 1.
Spatial properties of displays of
human remains in the museum case
studies suggesting shifts over time
in spatial design

Spatial Shifts	Case Studies		
	<i>Traditional displays (e.g. Early Egypt gallery, British Museum)</i>	<i>Recent cases (e.g. National Museum of Ireland)</i>	<i>Moesgaard Museum</i>
spaces / locations in museum layout	easily accessible, or integrated, display spaces or locations	segregated and enclosed display spaces	closed display spaces but with clear access
displays	display cases with human remains lying on key lines of movement	display cases with human remains in convex spaces that intensify local experiences	displays of human remains as distinct yet tightly intertwined lived experiences
visual organization	open visibility and exposure	visual insulation and intimacy	meaningful visual relations, combined with sensory links
use of space	neutral	spatial separation and intensification	spatial integration into an embodied and sensory non-sequential narrative

These spatial shifts and engagement changes suggest new forms of understanding through the concept of “introducing the human to human remains” (SWAIN, 2007, 197), and the acknowledgement of the sensory dimensions of museum learning. It is of particular interest that the most innovative and complex of these developments have been found in a university museum. As has been suggested (NELSON & MACDONALD, 2012, 419; see also ASHBY, 2018), although university museums have been thought to be traditional and “guardians of historic practices”, they are shown to be spaces for innovation and experimentation. Their aim of cutting-edge scholarship, in combination with service to the public (for their tripartite mission of teaching, research and engagement, see SIMPSON, 2012), gives them a special character and an enhanced potential for producing new ideas. The shifts identified in this paper, we believe, can open up more complex and richer ways to engage museums with human remains, over and above providing a spatial context for their respectful display.

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